

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
July 6 & 7, 2013
John Crosby
Proverbs: Heart
Proverbs 4:23**

I'm glad you're here with us today. Holiday weekends sometimes are light and often when it goes so fast, we don't catch the meaning of what is supposed to be happening. I'm glad that you are here. My prayer is that you will leave today feeling like this is the capstone of freedom.

I don't know about you, we all have our favorites, but I feel most alive in the summer. Summer brings me fully alive. It's the only time during the year when I'm so hot and sweaty that I can actually bend and touch my knees again! It takes summer for that to happen. So many of my favorite things happen in the summer. It reminds me of life in its abundance. That's the way Jesus described life. He promised that the people who followed Him would not have an easy life, that that their lives would get much more complicated and they would experience great pain but He said, "I promise you life in all of its abundance."

The Fourth of July is a peek at life in abundance. I want to just share with you some images that for me echo "This is what the abundant life should look like." (*Slides shown.*) It should look like Christmas morning or a Rockwell painting of Thanksgiving in all its abundance. It should look like all those kids at the bottom of the stairs ready to trick or treat. It should look like a wedding with the unbridled passion and promise. It should look like the fireworks that declare freedom is here. But the abundant life, I'm coming to believe, isn't so much about the event as it is about the people. Jesus saying "You will have abundance of life" meant in good times and in hard times, so the abundant life for you should be about what you are *becoming*. When I think of the abundant life, I think of the brains of Einstein, I love that, the compassion of Mother Teresa, the athleticism of Cirque du Soleil. Your body was designed to do that. The incredible joy that one human being can bring to another and the unbridled happiness of a child's laughter.

That's abundant life! Not an endless series of upper experiences but living the way God intended that human beings made in the image of God should live. We don't talk about that enough. You are made in the very image of God. That means when people look at you, they see a dim reflection of the God who made us all. G.K. Chesterton said, "We are statues of God walking about in a garden." Abundance of life. Why don't I experience that more often? Why is it only when the fireworks are going off or at the recessional of a wedding? Why don't we experience real life? John Eldredge said, "I know that it's life I need and it's life I'm looking for. But well-meaning religious people say, 'Oh, of course. . . God intends life for you. But that is eternal life, meaning, because of the death of Jesus, you can go to heaven when you die.'" Eternal life. Is that the same as the abundant life? Well, maybe in a way.

Friday night Sam and Jenny got married in here and if what Jesus meant by abundant life was eternal life after you die, then that would be like Sam handing Jenny the ring and saying, "Honey, because I've given you this ring, I'll take care of you in your retirement." I don't think

that's it. I think that somehow the abundant life is supposed to be experienced *now*, and I think something's gone wrong. I think you and I get little flashes, little glimmers, of what it could be like, but most of the time for most of us, life is not abundant. It is something else. Something has gone wrong at the heart of things. Something's gone wrong, I think, with the heart of life because that's what makes life work in all of its abundance.

There was a man who read a European fairy tale and said, "I want to update that and show what life is all about, what makes life." He says, "Well, sometimes you can tell what makes life by its absence," and so he developed some characters. This one needed—courage. The lion needed courage to live. The next one seemed to have courage, but needed—a brain. He needed intelligence to live life. But perhaps the saddest of the three was the one who couldn't live life because he was frozen in place, and he needed—a heart. I think we are frozen in place. Many of you are not tin men and tin women, but your hearts are not strong. The heart makes everything else happen, and many of you are frozen in place because you have lost your hearts. The apostle Paul says,

16 Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day [2 Corinthians 4:16].

That first line grabs me. It grabs me by the throat. "Therefore we do not lose heart." /lose heart! If somebody knows how not to lose heart, I want to hear all about it. We are all losing heart. Every day. We need wisdom from God to have the kind of hearts that will make possible the abundance of life. I'd like to show you where that comes from. Would you please turn to the Book of Proverbs? Open your Bibles to about to the middle, Proverbs, chapter 4. It's on page 949.

While you are doing that, we said that each week, we wanted to tell you something about this Book. Well, the Book of Proverbs was probably collected over several hundred years. The Proverbs were lumped into sections. The first nine chapters of the Book of Proverbs (there are 31 chapters) are not Proverbs. They are a poem, basically, about how to make wisdom the most important thing in your life. It is a story, those first nine chapters, of two women, one of whom reflects wisdom and the other who reflects disaster, wooing young men to choose which way to go.

Then chapters 10 to 20 are what we would call the Proverbs, the sayings, the wise sayings, the bumper stickers of King Solomon. Chapters 21 to 30 are a collection of Proverbs by other kings and other wise people, and the last chapter, chapter 31, is a poem that a king writes for his mom. It's the idea that when it all comes together in a human life, this is what wisdom looks like. So are we all at Proverbs, chapter 4? What I'd like to ask you to do is pull out a pen or pencil because there are some things I'd like you to underline for the next person who reads this. Chapter 4, verse 20, starts out this way.

20 My son,

or my child,

pay attention to what I say; turn your ear to my words. **21** Do not let them out of your sight, keep them within your heart;

“Let My words penetrate deep into your heart.” *My words*, and by *my words*, he’s talking about the words of Scripture, the words of God.

22 for they are life to those who find them and health to one's whole body. **23** Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.

Would everyone underline verse 23? “Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.” It is the wellspring of life.

24 Keep your mouth free of perversity; keep corrupt talk far from your lips. **25** Let your eyes look straight ahead; fix your gaze directly before you. **26** Give careful thought to the paths for your feet and be steadfast in all your ways. **27** Do not turn to the right or the left; keep your foot from evil.

The wisest man who ever lived wrote that. Solomon is remembered as the wisest man ever, and it is not because of the size of his brain. It is because when God invited Solomon to ask for anything in all the world, Solomon asked for a wise and discerning heart [1 Kings 3:9]. “Guard your heart. It is the center of everything.” Now this passage was used a lot of times, I think, as a warning to young men to say they should guard their hearts from sexual temptation by the kings and queens at the court. The Proverbs are saying, the worst thing you can do is lose your heart to some woman, to let some man seduce you, and there is a sense in which that is very true. You will never have an abundance of life, more than just one minute at a time, unless you guard your heart.

There is danger to your heart, and guarding your heart is the key to an abundant life, but too often, losing our hearts to someone else is just the top of the iceberg. I think there are a couple of reasons why you have to guard your heart. The first is that your heart is broken. Every human heart made this side of Adam and Eve is broken. The heart gets it 70 percent right. You know what you want to do, what you are supposed to do, and you go that way, but you don’t end up there. You end up someplace else. That’s what the apostle Paul was saying. “I know, but there seems to be some rule. I want what I don’t get, and what I don’t want to do, I end up doing [Romans 7:15].”

We all have broken hearts. All of us leak. The good inside of us is there, but it leaks out and we do something wrong or we are left like the tin man, frozen. I am built for the abundant life, to be a statue of God walking around the garden, but my heart is broken. I believe when Jesus said, “I have come that you might have life in all its abundance” that there is more to the story. “I have come that you might have life in all its abundance” is John, chapter 10, verse 10, part b. Without looking, do you know what John 10:10a is? John says, “I have come that you might have life in all its abundance,” but right before that, Jesus says, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; but I have come that you might have life in all its abundance.”

The reason you need to guard your heart is because there is a thief, whose only purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. Your heart is broken. God intends life for you, but that life is opposed by evil and the answer according to Proverbs is that you would learn to guard your heart, the most precious thing about you. More important than your brain, more significant than your body, is your heart, your will, your soul, the seat of everything. Usually you don’t lose your heart in trauma. Most of you lose it day by day, a little bit at a time. Ezekiel talks about that. He says, “I’ll take away their stubborn hearts of stone and give them a new heart, an obedient heart [Ezekiel

11:19]” but over time, hearts get hard. Hearts get stubborn. Hearts get tired. Some of you have tired hearts, and I’m not talking about your bodies or cold hearts.

The Book of Proverbs says that every day. “Listen, my son, and set your heart on the right path [Proverbs 23:19].” Here’s a thought for many of us. We get on the wrong path and little by little, end up in the wrong place. How many of you know someone who was with you for a long time, maybe grew up with you, maybe it was on your first job, maybe someone you dated, and they started to go off the path a little bit and a little bit and a little bit? And their life is now in a very different place. They went off the path, and they lost their hearts.

It’s said another way in 2nd Kings 10:31, “King Jehu was not careful to keep the law of God with all of his heart.” And so his heart became weak, and he started to worship other gods. Here is one that Presbyterians need to watch out for. We pick and chose from the law of God. Those parts of the law that we agree with, those parts of God’s Word that resonate with us, we spend all our time there. The parts that are tough or that we struggle with or don’t understand, we set aside, and that’s where the Evil One comes in. The result of all that is that Jesus, who, again, loves the Proverbs, says, “But the things that come out of a person’s mouth come from the heart [Matthew 15:18].” And the result of a broken heart is a broken mouth.

Usually I think that just happens day by day. You hardly notice it, but over the decades, not over the months, over the decades, you’ve become a grump. Over the decades, you’ve become a worrier. Over the decades, you’ve become a critic. Over the decades, you have become someone who comes to church on Sunday but nobody would know it by Tuesday afternoon because your heart is broken.

I think that happens in regular life but sometimes tragedy or injustice brings it to a crisis point. One of my friends from Flagship [Flagship Athletic Club] where we worked out together—well, where she worked out and I watched her work out—she would run an hour every day. The day before yesterday, she was walking her dogs in Eden Prairie and a tree fell on her and killed her. Yesterday a group of people were ending a long flight from Korea landing in San Francisco, and the plane exploded. Right there, either their hearts were going to get them through it, however it turned out, or their hearts would give way.

I started the month with a young couple in our church that I had the privilege of marrying. They have a baby now, Makayla, who is all of 18 months old. She is one of those kids you see running around in here. She thinks all of you are her grandparents and that this is her house. Late in June the daycare provider called the dad and said, “Something is wrong,” and by the time he got there, she was almost dead. Eighteen months old and she had a stroke. Totally uncommon. She was at Children’s Hospital in St. Paul for a long time. I got there the next day and, of course, the parents hadn’t slept all night. I prayed with them, and we tried to talk about it. The dad was being the dad, “I’ve got to hold this together.” The worst thing for a parent is when they can’t fix their child.

As I was leaving to walk to the elevator, John said, “Can I go with you?” I said, “Sure.” As we were walking, he stopped me and said, “Give me the two-minute answer here. We’re trying our best. Give me the 90-second version, “How could God let something like this happen to little Makayla? I just don’t understand.” John was in danger of losing his heart and I had, literally, just seconds to remind him, both about the hope of the Gospel and the fact that we are at war, an undeclared, unstopping war between good and evil on a broken planet. John had to remember

both the war and the hope that God will never leave us and will hold our hands all the way through the valley and decide which he would feed. We prayed together briefly and I got on the elevator and prayed again for him, for his sake and for the sake of his family that he would not lose his heart.

Makayla is doing well. In her stroke, she lost her speech but she is already getting back lots and lots of words. She had lost the ability to walk but the other day, they showed me a picture of her pulling herself up to her feet and taking a couple of staggering steps, her mom and dad behind her with their hearts in their hands.

How do you guard your heart? Not just against a crisis. A crisis is just a crisis. You can't control that, but how do you guard your heart day in and day out? This is why I wanted you to leave your Bibles open. Reopen them if they are closed because I think there is a **four-way test for the condition of your heart**, and I'd like you to see which of these you pass and which you need to have God spend time on with you. How do we guard our hearts? We take a four-way test for heart *DIS*-ease.

The first one, **what you hear**, actually starts before where it says, "Guard your heart." At the very beginning of chapter 4, it says, "My child, pay attention to what I say. Listen carefully to my words. Don't lose sight of them. Let the word of God penetrate deep into your heart for it brings life to all who find it and healing to the body." You and I live in a world of unending sound. What penetrates deep into your heart? Do you take two pills of God's Word and then go away or do you let it penetrate deep in? With what are you filling your mind? Since the time you woke up, you have been listening to things, on the radio, the TV, other voices. What words have filled your mind? The authors of the Old Testament said to the parents, "Take these words of mine and repeat them to your children when you rise and when you sleep, when you go into the house and when you go out on the road. Talk about them one with another [Deuteronomy 6:7]."

When was the last time you exposed yourselves to words that bring life, because I've got to tell you, there are plenty of words that steal the heart. As you think about your week, how much have you heard of the presence of God, of the hope that God offers? How many conversations have you been in, how much have you read, how much have you seen that is word that gives healing to you? What do you hear?

The second thing, **what you see**, comes after guard your heart. It says,

25 Let your eyes look straight ahead; fix your eyes

Underline or circle the word eyes,

fix your eyes directly before you. **26** Give careful thought to the paths for your feet

We live in a visual culture. I tried to model that today with the images I put up on the screen—all kinds of imagery especially powerful for the human heart—whether it is the sight of fireworks that lifts our hearts, or pornography that pulls our hearts into another place, or the sight of violence that stimulates part of our brain, or the sight of a father taking care of his baby. What do you watch? Maybe the second part of the test would be *what do you discipline your eyes to see* throughout the day?

The third, **where you go**, actually, is taking it away from what I hear and what I see and talking about what I *do*. Where do you go? Proverbs says, "Mark out a straight path for your feet. Stay on the safe path." This is what Jesus means when He says, "There are two paths in life. There is the broad path that everybody takes and it leads right to the cliff that people fall over. And then there is the narrow path that leads to life. Don't get sidetracked. Keep your feet from following evil."

I said these first nine chapters of Proverbs are a poem about two women. One woman is calling the young man, "Come here. Come here. Come here. Listen to the voice of wisdom and live. Become wise. Become strong. Become good. Become noble. Come this way. It is a path that many people will not take." And the other woman, the voice of society, the voice often of evil, is saying, "Oh, just go with the crowd. Be like everybody else. Take the path of least resistance." Where you go marks what will happen with your heart.

Could I just add parenthetically to this, too often in church that means "Avoid the bad. Do the good." That is like *this much* of it because you know what you guys do? You avoid most of the bad, except the bad you really want to do. You do the good, but nobody goes on *the adventure*. Nobody gets on the yellow brick road and sees where it goes. We are supposed to be the people with the adventurous hearts, the ones who see the least, the lost, and the left behind on the side of the road, who go over to them. We are supposed to be the ones who will listen, the ones who will take a path that is different from all the other kids in your class. Don't kid yourselves that you get on the road when you become an adult. You are on it now, and that road can either be the greatest adventure with all its pain and all its joy or it can just be plodding, one foot in front of another. I've got to tell you great-grandparents, the road is not over. The road does not have to say, "Sit in this chair for the rest of your life." Come on! This is the God who made the Himalayas as well as the dung beetles. This is the God who wants you on the path of adventure.

The fourth way that I believe you can guard your hearts is **what you say**. We not only guard by what we hear, what we see, and where we go, the path we choose, it is clear that Jesus agrees with the writer of Proverbs, that what you say is a test of the heart. Avoid all perverse talk. Stay away from corrupt speech. Last week Deb Kielsmeier here and Steph Spencer at The Table talked about how the second most important theme in all of Proverbs is the words we use. "Out of the heart, the mouth flows," says Jesus. And may I just say, don't turn this into Sunday School 202. Sunday School 202 is, "Don't use bad words. Use your church words." That is not what this is about. "Out of the heart, the mouth flows" means that we are to bring healing and joy and encouragement, not gossip and anger and base language. Sometimes I think God is not offended by our speech. I think God is just bored. Really? "You want to spend the next half hour talking about *that*? Really?"

I want you to take the test of the heart today, but think about yesterday. Okay, you just close your eyes for a second and let's think about yesterday. Think of the language you used from the time you woke up, who you talked to and was anything said beyond the trivial? The trivial is important. You have to talk about who goes and gets the food and who goes and gets the cleaning, but did you ever get past trivial with anyone yesterday? Jesus does not want you to be the philosopher king, but He does want you to talk about the fact that 10,000 years from now, you are going to wake up in the morning and what will you talk about then?

On my desk I put a little sticky note right under the computer that says, “The lack of encouragement is *UN*-encouragement.” I try once a day to write a note or pick up the phone and specifically *EN*-courage, give courage, to another child of God. Did you do that yesterday? Can you do that today? Okay, open your eyes.

You know, the story of the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz* is taken from a European folk tale. *The Wizard of Oz* only gives a fraction of it. The story is that the Wicked Witch of the West became jealous of the love that the Tin Man, an ax-man, a chopper in the forest, had for one of the little Munchkin girls. And jealous of this love, she cursed him so that everything he hit would turn to steel. If he hit himself with his ax, that part of him would turn to steel. If he whacked his head, his head would turn to steel. For a long time the Tin Man thought this was not so much a curse as it was a great thing because he needed to raise money to marry the little Munchkin girl. He became strong and fierce and more and more accomplished in his work. Then finally, the Wicked Witch of the West had him cut himself in the chest, and his heart turned to steel and fell out. Then he just worked and worked but forgot why he was working because he had lost his heart. One day, as in the tale, he was caught in the rain, and he froze in place.

I think many of you have lost your hearts or you have congestive heart failure of the soul. Your hearts are working at 20 percent. God wants your hearts to be fully alive. Can I tell you that your faith is not that of the Tin Man? There is no magic involved here. It is far better than that. There is a God who brings the dead to life. He has your name on His lips and your heart in His hands. May you be wise!

Lord Jesus, these were sayings You heard growing up as a child. “Guard Your heart above all else.” Your Father probably said, “Guard Your heart for it is the wellspring of life.” You guarded Your heart, Lord Jesus, and You taught the people how they might guard theirs. In Your Name, I ask my sisters and brothers, what have they heard? What have they allowed to be spoken around them against which they must guard their hearts? What have they seen in this incredible world that is causing them to lose heart? Where have they been that has taken them off the path of life? Help us to guard our hearts, Lord God. The clearest indicator of our hearts is what comes out of our lips. I am not going to say, “Guard my lips,” Lord Jesus. Guard my heart so that my lips might give life to those around me. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Spirit, we pray. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.